Against the Grain

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Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-Devil's Advocate-Canaries in the Coal Mine

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Devil's Advocate — Canaries in the Coal Mine

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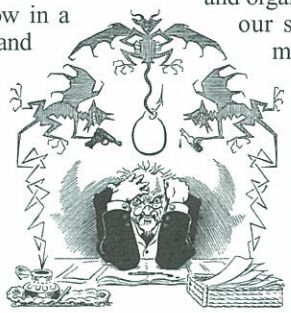
Our colleagues who worked in the libraries of the Fertile Crescent would have had to understand the technology of making and tending the clay tablets which human beings then used to record information. Librarians at other times and places would have had to know how to make, care for, organize, and retrieve other materials and formats: papyrus scrolls, parchment, quipus, paper, and microformats to name but a few. We humans are engaged now in a change of record formats and although we cannot guess how this change will work out, we have certainly had an explosive beginning as the human record is being converted, and increasingly produced, in digital forms. Like our earlier colleagues, we today have to know the technology which we use to record our record. A librarian today must have a grounding in technology and those jobs where one can scrape by without that knowledge decline each year. This knowledge of technology has to be integrated with other aspects of what we do: technology, though, make no mistake, is secondary; the technology changes but the library function abides.



What is the function of a library? Simply, it is to collect, organize, and preserve all or defined parts of the human record for dissemination now or in the distant future. Our special skill as a species is to remember things and to pass what we learn on to our children. I believe that when the human genome is understood, we will find a gene for recording and storing information—a library gene, if you will; the behavior is too consistent to be happenstance and too important for our survival as a species to be left to chance. No, it is hard-coded in the genes.

Many devices have been tried to remember our discoveries and sagas and to preserve those things of beauty we cherish in quiet moments but the best method we have invented so far to remember are institutions like libraries, museums, art galleries, etc. I broadly include all here as a part of the library function. As materials become digitized, they tend to converge to digital libraries as format becomes less critical—except for the originals, of course. But the library function of organizing this information, now in 1's and 0's, abides.

Libraries are how human civilization remembers and passes on our heritage to following generations. Libraries are the glue holding civilization together and organizing those collections is our special skill—it is what makes us a discipline. It has fallen to our generation of librarians to begin the organization of digital records and decisions we make today will reverberate for the next millennium. This is a solemn duty and a great task; few generations have had the challenge of dealing with a change in the storage medium of human records and none has faced a challenge such as we face. Never has the importance of organizing information been clearer to us and to the average citizen. Never; not ever. And not since the invention of the printing press has the question of preservation of the human record been as important because digital records are about the most transient we have ever developed. These two library functions, also, abide.

If we are going to have people to perform this library function, we have to educate them and we have done this in library schools traditionally. I have told students what I believe to be true: the Internet is the Librarians' Full Employment Act. I think, though, that we are failing to educate enough librarians faced as we are with the huge demands for skills of organizing and preserving digital information. In this essay, I will outline areas where library education is failing that are addressable with means at hand. In the following essay, I will discuss those means.

Critical Mass

Herbert S. White's 1979 "Critical Mass for Library Education"[1] posed a number of disturbing questions about the state of library education at the time.

Dean White deals with "...[raising] the question of the minimum quantity or mass of faculty expertise which might be necessary to offer students a full range of library educational experience."[2] He has several tables that summarize his investigations of 40 library schools based on an opportunistic sample. It is impossible to reconstruct his sample but similar data exist elsewhere. For this discussion, data from the 51 library schools reporting data in 1979/80 and 1998/99 are presented in Table 1 using the summary criteria and format he used. The reported statistics for 1979/80 do differ in detail from **White's**—the years and sample sizes differ—however, the pictures in the two sets of tables from the late 1970's are roughly similar. Have things changed since **White's** article?

Table 1: Summary Faculty Data for 51 Library Schools, 1979/80-1998/99

	Full-Time Faculty			FTE Faculty		
Data	79-80	98-99	+/- %	79-80	98-99	+/- %
Mean	10.7	11.7	+ 9.3%	??	??	- 4.0%
Median	10	11	+ 10%	??	??	- 9.7%
Under 6	0 schools	4 schools		0 schools	3 schools	
6 - 7.9	7 schools	6 schools		3 schools	3 schools	
8 - 9.9	17 schools	9 schools		17 schools	5 schools	
10 -14.9	18 schools	21 schools		21 schools	22 schools	
15 & up	9 schools	11 schools		11 schools	18 schools	

Sources: Association of American Library Schools: Library Education Statistical Report, 1981. F41-F47.

Association for Library and Information Science Education, ALISE Statistical Report and Database, *http://www.alise.org/nondiscuss/pub_stats.html*. Faculty data are summarized from, Table I-41 Full-Time Faculty, *http://ils.unc.edu/ALISE/2000/Faculty/Table1-41.htm*, and Table I-43, Part-Time Faculty, *http://ils.unc.edu/ALISE/2000/Faculty/Table1-43.htm*.

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There are many ways to summarize these data and there are individual stories associated with each of the institutions but what is of interest here is not a detailed examination of the data but merely doing what White did: using the size of faculty as an indicator of his notion of critical mass. The numbers are rough but indicative.

While **White** was examining a period of decline, the figures over the twenty-year period examined here, in terms of faculty and enrollments, have risen. The mean and median figures for Full-Time (FT) and Full-Time-Equivalent (FTE) faculty by institution rose by about 2.5 faculty members over the period, however. Again, using **White**'s criteria, note that the number of institutions with fewer than 6 Full-Time faculty has gone from 0 in 1979/80 to 4 today and 10 are under 8, as opposed to the 7 below 8 in the earlier period. The figures for FTE faculty are similar in that the lower tail of the distribution is lower now than in 1979/80. On the other hand, there are more bigger institutions, too. The rich certainly got richer but the poor got much, much poorer. Twenty-two institutions (43% of the total) either lost (18) or gained no (4) full-time faculty over the period. There is reason, then, to be concerned that critical mass of faculty is still an issue. But, even if an institution gained one or two people, did that help, given the changes in that period?

For instance, the number of FT and FTE students rose over the period. FT students rose from 3,007 to 3,316 and the FTE students rose from 4,877 to 10,956. The ratio of FT students to FT faculty is essentially unchanged, but the addition of so many part-time students has changed the face of library education and exacerbated the load on faculty; they are too few, in addition to being too small. Note that if we divide the FTE faculty into the FTE students, we find that there were an average of 8.1 FTE students per FTE faculty member in 1978/79 and an average of 15.1 in 1998/99. Faculty members have a lot more students to deal with—on average.

Worse Still . . .

In the last twenty years, a number of things affecting libraries have changed and the demands on the institutions which educate librarians have, too. In 1979, when **White** was concerned about schools' being too small, there was no Internet. As mentioned above, if nothing else, the Internet and ubiquitous networking have dispelled any lingering doubts as to the value of well-organized information and, as noted, library schools have responded either with new courses or by integrating new technology in traditional courses.

If we have more students for a year or two and insufficiently massive faculty to have anything but basic courses, we must find a way to augment course offerings in the basic information technology aspects of our curricula. A related matter is that some specialities within our field, like those dealing with preservation, or medical or law libraries, cannot be taught by any but a few institutions. Can we enhance teaching these specialties or provide introductory courses in places without faculty to teach them? But how—particularly for the smaller institutions?

In addition to adding a new area for the curriculum in the last 20 years, we have not been teaching a traditional area as well as we should. Over this 20-year period, library education has changed and been captivated by a fad. A result of this development is that few library schools have full-time faculty teaching cataloging and classification and few PhD's are being produced to teach the next generation. Given that a central responsibility of our field is the organization of knowledge, the erosion from library schools of full-time faculty who teach what is known about the organization of records comes at a time when the importance of what we do has never been clearer. The world beat a path to our door and we closed it.

Next time: What can be done?

Table 2. Summary Student Data for 51 Library Schools, 1979/80-1998/99

Year	Full-Time Students	FTE Students
79-80	3,007	4,877
98-99	3,316	10,956
Increase	10.3%	225%

Sources: Association of American Library Schools: Library Education Statistical Report, 1981. S3-S15.

Student data are summarized from Table II-1-c-2a, Enrollment (Number) by Program and Gender, ALA-Accredited Masters, Fall, 1999. *http://ils.unc.edu/ALISE/2000/Students/Table2-1c2a.htm.*

Endnotes

1. Herbert S. White, "Critical Mass for Library Education", American Libraries, 10 (September 1979), 468-481.
2. White, 470.

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